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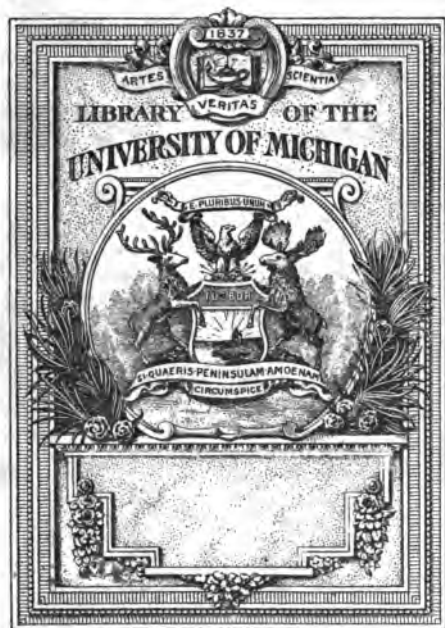
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OF "FIFINE AT THE FAIR"

ETC.



OF  
"FIFINE AT THE FAIR"  
"CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER-DAY"

39663

AND  
OTHER OF MR BROWNING'S POEMS

Campbell, Mrs. <sup>BY</sup> Jean Morison  
JEANIE MORISON

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS  
EDINBURGH AND LONDON  
MDCCCXCII

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INSCRIBED,  
WITH TRUE LOVE,  
TO  
MISS BROWNING.



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“ All partial beauty was a pledge  
Of beauty in its plenitude.”

“ Highest truth man e’er supplied,  
Was ever fable on outside.”

—*Easter-Day.*

## OF "FIFINE AT THE FAIR."

---

WHILE no poem of Mr Browning's has been so *un*-understood as "Sordello," it is almost equally true that no poem of his has been more hopelessly *mis*-understood than "Fifine at the Fair." This is owing in part, I think, to the motto which is prefixed to it, in which the name "Don Juan" suggests a life of licence, and to the verisimilitude to the idea suggested by the motto, of the allegorical form in which, as in so many of his poems, Mr Browning has used an earthly and tangible similitude to bring out a metaphysical and eternal verity. It is throughout one of the leading characteristics of Mr Browning's teaching, that, like a greater Teacher still, he teaches almost invariably in parables. To him the open book of the world in which we live, with its men and women, its human interests and passions, its gloom and its glory, its shadow and its sunshine, was after all but the vestibule of the

Temple,—the children's porch wherein we are set to learn as by object-lessons, from the similitudes of "things seen and temporal," those things which are "unseen and eternal." "Which things are an allegory" was to him the deepest interest of this human life of ours in which he so rejoiced; and it is largely owing to this double and deeper interest, this piercing through the shadow to the Substance which cast it, which was an integral and inseparable part of his mind, that some of his most spiritual and instructive poems, such as "Fifine at the Fair," have been grossly misinterpreted; and many others, even where the language in which they are couched is as clear as daylight, remain, and probably always must remain, for many readers "a book sealed."

In addition to this primary cause of misconception, much of the obscurity which even intelligent readers often find in Mr Browning's poetry is, I think, owing to a difficulty in finding the focus, as it were; the main drift and central idea of the poem being lost sight of in the very luxuriance of its surroundings;—as one sometimes sees the plan and outline of some ancient castle almost lost amid the green embrace of ivy and creeper with which nature has taken it to her breast. What I would aim at, therefore, is to endeavour to bring out what I conceive to be the true inner meaning of "Fifine at the Fair" and the other poems of which I am to treat, and while leaving un-

touched all the lovely luxuriance of overgrowth, to adjust the focus, and with reverent hand to try to emphasise the half-hidden outlines, so that the plan and purpose, the heart and lesson, of each poem may be more easily discerned.

First, then, of "Fifine at the Fair."

Here the first thing we have to remark is Elvire's challenge to Don Juan in the motto which precedes the poem,—

"Why don't you arm your brow  
With noble impudence? Why don't you swear and  
vow  
No sort of change is come to any sentiment  
You ever had for me?"

The poem is the answer to this challenge, and what suggested it, may, I think, be very clearly read between the lines of the beautiful lyrics which form its Prologue and its Epilogue.

The Prologue describes a fancy the poet had, "Fancy which turned a fear," as he lay one day basking "far out in the bay," when "waves laughed warm and clear." Between him and the noonday sun there came floating by, as he

"Lay floating too,  
Such a strange butterfly,"

its sun-suffused wings

"Like soul and nought beside.

A handbreadth overhead !  
 All of the sea my own,  
 It owned the sky instead ;  
 Both of us were alone."

And the fancy comes to him—

"What if a certain soul  
 Which early slipped its sheath,  
 And has for its home the whole  
 Of heaven, thus look beneath,  
  
 Thus watch one who, in the world,  
 Both lives and likes life's way,  
 Nor wishes the wings unfurled  
 That sleep in the worm, they say ?  
 . . . . .  
 Does she look, pity, wonder  
 At one who mimics flight,  
 Swims—heaven above, sea under,  
 Yet always earth in sight ?"

There can be no difficulty as to the reference here. The world knows the story of Mr Browning's life, and how for him "its sun went down at noon." On its human and personal and allegoric side, this much misunderstood poem is, as I conceive it, a passionate apology to the "Lyric Love" who already "had for



her home the whole of heaven," for that not least pathetic part of our human life,—at least in all healthy natures,—that, after the first sacred absorption of a great love or a great sorrow, the time inevitably comes when the blinds must be drawn up, and the workaday world allowed admittance once more.

It was an integral part of Mr Browning's nature, and also an integral part of his creed, always to face facts, however startling they might at first appear; and frankly and boldly he confesses here that he still—

"Both lived and liked life's way,  
Nor wished the wings unfurled  
That sleep in the worm, they say."

But, granting the fact, *is* there infidelity in it to the other and supreme affection? Quite true, he enjoys seeing Fifine dance at the Fair—meanwhile; he is interested and amused by the hundred and one distractions of the passing hour, but what has that to do with "the love still kept for her"? And so, in the longed-for reunion with which the quaint Epilogue ends the poem, the Epitaph which sums up his life is fitly concluded by Elvire herself—

"‘I end with—Love is all and Death is nought!’  
quoth She." ✓

As is usual with Mr Browning, however, the highest and most permanent of earthly things is only a hint

and a suggestion of a Higher and more Permanent still, and the poem in its entirety takes a wider and more metaphysical range, as it tells of rising through the Passing to the Permanent, through the outer False to the inner True, through the Flesh to the Soul, through the distorted Real to the perfect Ideal, through the Type to the Antitype, through Man to God ;—

" His problem poised aright "

is

" From the given point evolve the Infinite."

" Into the truth of things—

Out of their falseness rise, and reach thou, and remain ! "

✱ The slight thread of narrative which runs through and holds together this, perhaps the most metaphysical and discursive of all Mr Browning's poems, which this Prologue and Epilogue enclose, takes the form of the arrival at the little Norman seaside village of Pornic of a travelling show, whose performance the poet and his wife Elvire go together to see. Among its varied attractions—such as the " six-legged sheep," the ape grown

" Grim

And grey with pitying fools who find a joke in him,"

the strong man who can hold a " cart-wheel 'twixt his teeth "—is a certain young gipsy *danseuse*, by name

Fifine ; and the jealousy which her husband's interest in this travelling-show beauty is supposed to arouse in Elvire, and his answer to it, is the allegorical *motif* of the poem.

The ground he takes up in his answer is, it is only

"By practice with the False I reach the True";

and this may be taken as the metaphysical basis of the poem. Man and the world are so constituted that it is only through the passing presentments of truth, each of which is in itself false, that we can pierce to the eternal verities behind ; it is only through the flesh that we can reach the soul, only through the type we find the antitype, only through man we can see God.

His first question is—Wherein is the attraction of this gipsy life, of these strolling-player folk ? (in whom, and in Fifine as their representative, he finds his allegorical presentment of the false and passing outside of things). What pearl have they picked up from our rubbish-heap which they think worth more than all we keep ? How comes it that if you make the offer to one of them—

"Abandon this career, . . . and while I have a  
purse

Means shall not lack ; . . . his thanks will be the  
roundest curse

That ever rolled from lip? . . .

How comes it, all we hold so dear they count so cheap?

. . . . .

Why is it that whene'er a faithful few combine  
To cast allegiance off, play truant, nor repine,  
Agree to bear the worst, forego the best in store  
For us who, left behind, do duty as of yore,—  
Why is that, disgraced, they seem to relish life the  
more?"

For answer, he says, Look at their tent; see

"How the pennon from its dome,  
Frenetic to be free, makes one red stretch for home!

. . . . .

Frenetic to be free! And, do you know, there beats  
Something within my breast, as sensitive?—repeats  
The fever of the flag? My heart makes just the same  
Passionate stretch, fires up for lawlessness, lays claim  
To share the life they lead: losels, who have and use  
The hour what way they will. . . .  
To the wood then, to the wild: free life, full liberty!"

Freedom,—that is the charm of that gipsy life of  
theirs; and there is in each of us that same hunger for  
absolute freedom,—freedom to toy even with what  
we know to be false and passing, if we will. And  
wherein is the charm of Fifine? How am I—

"To understand

The acknowledged victory of her I call my queen,

Sexless and bloodless sprite : though mischievous and  
     mean,  
 Yet free and flower-like too"?

No creature is made so mean, he says in answer, but  
 that in—

    "Some way, it boasts, could we investigate,  
 Its supreme worth."

No grain of sand on the beach but for once catches  
 the sun's ray fullest, and shines "earth's brightest for  
 the nonce." Where, then, is this "supreme worth" to  
 be found in Fifine? What is the "self-vindicating  
 flash" which raises *her* for the moment "to the very  
 throne of things"? In what one respect does she  
 excel all others? In order to ascertain this, he  
 says—

    "The mingled ray she shoots, I decompose.  
 Her antecedents, take for execrable! . . .

    . . . Let be, there was no worst  
 Of degradation spared Fifine : ordained from first  
 To last, in body and soul, for one life-long debauch,  
 The Pariah of the North, the European Nautch !  
*This, far from seek to hide, she puts in evidence*  
*Calmly, displays the brand, bids pry without offence*  
*Your finger on the place. . . .*

Well then, . . . what wonder if there steal  
 Unchallenged to my heart the force of one appeal

She makes? . . .

So absolutely good is truth, truth never hurts  
The teller, whose worse crime gets somehow grace,  
avowed.

To me, that silent pose and prayer proclaimed aloud  
'Know all of me outside, the rest be emptiness  
For such as you!' . . .

Be it enough, there's *truth* i' the pleading, which  
comports

With no word spoken out in cottages or courts,  
Since all I plead is, Pay for just the sight you see,  
And give no credit to another charm in me."

This that you see is *not* the true Fifine: she frankly  
tells you so. But she asks you to give her credit for  
✓ nothing but what you see. In this one point these  
player-folk are the truest in all the world.

"Is it not just our hate of falsehood, fleetingness,  
And the mere part things play, that constitutes express  
The inmost charm of this Fifine and all her tribe?  
Actors! *We* also act, but only *they* inscribe  
Their style and title so, and preface, only they,  
Performance with 'A lie is all we do or say. . . .  
Frankly we simulate.'"

✓ Their outside is false *professedly*. But there *is* a true  
and quite different Fifine under the Fifine you see act.  
So it really is with each of us, and with all things.

✓ There is a true *ego* under the false shifting seeming of each of us. There is an Ideal *I* under the distorted real *I*. There *is* an eternal *True* beneath the false passing presentment of things—

"That's the first o' the truths found : all things, slow  
Or quick i' the passage, come at last to that, you know !  
*Each has a false outside, whereby a truth is forced  
To issue from within.*"

But why, objects Elvire, still trifle with what you know to be but the false outside of things ? Why not be content with what you know to be truth ? Why prefer, to your own wife, Elvire,

"Chaste, temperate, serene,  
What sputters blue and red, this Fizgig called Fifine ?"

"Suppose," he answers, "I have become, after much anxiety and suspense, the happy possessor of a veritable Raphael, even then, after the first raptures,

"One chamber must not coop  
My life in, though it boast a marvel like my prize."

I have it safe on my wall and in my heart, and I may go and amuse myself with other things, sure to find my treasure safe there on my return home. By-and-by I may be found overlooking

"With relish, leaf by leaf, Doré's last picture-book."

But suppose a servant were to cry, "Fire in the gallery!" the relative value in which I hold them would very soon be seen.

"Methinks, were I engaged  
In Doré, elbow-deep, portfolios million-paged  
To the four winds would pack, sped by the heartiest  
    curse  
Was ever launched from lip, to strew the universe ;  
While I would brave the best o' the burning, bear away  
Either my perfect piece in safety, or else stay  
And share its fate : if made a martyr, why repine ?  
Inextricably wed, such ashes mixed with mine !"

Such is the relative estimate in which he really holds Elvire and Fifine—the True and the Permanent, the False and the Passing. Nay, more than this, it is *by means* of Fifine that he learns to discern the true Elvire, for it is Fifine who has taught him that, while things have a false outside, there yet *is* a True behind the False in all things ; that there is an ideal *ego* in each of us, hidden within, quite different from, and yet to be guessed at through, its distorted outward presentment. So through the deformed Real we pierce to the perfect Ideal in those we love. "Thus," he says—

"I seem to understand the way heart chooses heart  
By help of the outside face. . . . Each soul . . .



. . . goes striving to combine  
 With what shall right the wrong, the under or above  
 the standard "

(in itself) and

" Art—which I may style the love of loving, rage  
 Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things  
 For truth's sake, whole and sole, . . .

. . . instinctive Art  
 Must fumble for the whole, once fixing on a part  
 However poor, surpass the fragment, and aspire  
 To reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire.  
 Art, working with a will, discards the superflux,  
 Contributes to defect, toils on till—*fiat lux*,—  
 There's the restored, the prime, the individual type!"

So beneath the outward seeming of the "tall, pale,  
 deep-eyed personage" the world knows as Elvire, he  
 pierces to the Ideal Elvire hid within, and finds "the  
 loveliness he loves," all by help of Fifine, who has  
 taught him that the false outside hides within it a  
 quite different True.

As an example, he takes a half-finished work of  
 Michelagnolo's. Suppose, he says,—

"I the picture gallery . . .  
 Upheaves itself a marble, a magnitude man-shaped  
 As snow might be. One hand—the Master's—smoothed  
 and scraped

That mass, he hammered on and hewed at, till he  
hurled

Life out of death, and left a challenge : for the world,  
Death still,—since who shall dare, close to the image,  
say,

If this be purposed Art, or mere mimetic play  
Of Nature ? ”

But—

“ Step back a pace or two !

And then, who dares dispute the gradual birth its due  
Of breathing life, or breathless immortality,  
Where out she stands, and yet stops short, half bold,  
half shy,

Hesitates on the threshold of things, since partly blent  
With stuff she needs must quit, her native element  
I’ the mind o’ the Master. . . . What startling brain-  
escape

Of Michelagnolo takes elemental shape ?

I think he meant the daughter of the old man o’ the  
sea,

Emerging from her wave, goddess Eidotheé.

. . . . .  
Whom you shall never find evolved, in earth, in air,  
In wave ; but manifest i’ the *soul’s* domain, why, there  
She ravishingly moves to meet you, all through aid  
O’ the soul ! Bid shine what should, dismiss into the  
shade

What should not be,—and there triumphs the paramount  
Emprise o' the Master!"

And yet were we to judge merely by sense, of how little value would that uncouth mass of marble seem!

"I bought  
That work—(despite plain proof, whose hand it was  
had wrought  
I' the rough: . . . )—bought dearly that uncouth  
Unwieldly bulk, for just ten dollars—'Bulk, would  
fetch—  
Converted into lime—some five pauls!' grinned a  
wretch,  
Who, bound on business, paused to hear the bargain-  
ing,  
And would have pitied me 'but for the fun o' the  
thing!'  
Shall such a wretch be—you?"

he asks of Elvire.

"Must—while I show Elvire  
Shaming all other forms, seen as I see her here  
I' the soul,—this other-you perversely look outside,  
And ask me, 'where i' the world is charm to be de-  
scribed  
I' the tall thin personage, with paled eye, pensive face,  
Any amount of love, and some remains of grace?'  
*See yourself in my soul!"*

—See the ideal Elvire which my soul has been able to evolve from the delusive outward seeming evident to sense!

And must not this achievement of mine (in thus reaching to the ideal of His work) be pleasing to the Master?

"I gather heart through just such conquests of the soul,"

and

"Praise the loyalty o' the scholar,—stung by taunt Of fools 'Does this [uncouth bulk of marble] evince thy Master they so vaunt?

Did he then perpetrate the plain abortion here?'

Who cries 'His work am I! full fraught by Him, I clear

His fame from each result of accident and time,  
And thus restore His work to its fresh morning-prime:  
Not daring touch the mass of marble, fools deride,  
But putting my idea in plaster by its side,  
His, since mine; I, He made, vindicate who made me!'

For, you must know, I too achieved Eidotheé,  
In silence and by night—dared justify the lines  
Plain to my soul, . . .

If she stood forth at last, the Master was to thank!

Yet may there not have smiled approval in His eyes—  
That one at least was left who, born to recognise

Perfection in the piece imperfect, worked, that night,  
 In silence, such his faith, until the apposite  
 Design was out of him, truth palpable once more ;  
 And then,—for at one blow its fragments strewed the  
 floor,—

Recalled the same to live within his soul as heretofore."

Nor can he believe that such gains of the soul (in  
 reaching the Ideal hid within the Real in another) can  
 ever be lost to the soul who gained them—

"But appertain,  
 Immortally, by right firm, indefeasible,  
 To who performed the feat, through God's grace and  
 man's will!"

And how much more

"Will love become intense  
 Hereafter, when 'to love' means yearning to dispense,  
 Each soul, its own amount of gain through its own  
 mode

Of practising with life, upon some soul which owed  
 Its treasure, all diverse and yet in worth the same,  
 To new work and changed way! . . .

. . . What joy, when each may supplement  
 The other, . . . till, wholly blent,  
 The old things shall be new, and, what we both ignite,  
 Fuse, lose the varicolor in achromatic white!

. . . Love's law, which I avow

And thus would formulate: each soul lives, longs and  
works

For itself, by itself, because a lodestar lurks,  
An other than itself."

Whatever this lodestar may be, or wherever it may  
hide

"Or it, or he, or she—

*Thoukulos e brudeion eper kekramene,—*

(For fun's sake, where the phrase has fastened, leave it  
fixed !

So soft it says, (God, man, or both together mixed!)  
This, guessed at through the flesh, by parts which prove  
the whole,

This constitutes the soul discernible by soul,  
Elvire, by me !"

But why, still objects Elvire, if it be merely soul seek-  
ing for a soul to suit—why must you

"Needs review the sex, the army, rank and file  
Of womankind" ?

Why must it be a woman you take to help you ? Why  
Elvire and not the "Strong man," her husband ?

"Be frank for charity." Who is it you deceive—  
Yourself, or me, or God, with all this make-believe ?"

Please, he answers, "I myself need to be proved  
true—how can I now, to have it proved to myself that there

is a true ideal *me* inside this seeming me, and nothing so helps us to realise the Ideal in ourselves as when some one else sees it.

"Nothing so confirms  
One's faith in the prime point that one's alive, not dead,  
In all Descents to Hell whereof I ever read,  
As when a phantom there"

exclaims, What,

"You that breathe, along with us the ghosts?"

But why must this discerning some-one be a woman?

"Because," he answers,

"One woman's worth, in that respect, such hairy hosts  
Of the other sex and sort!"

If it is men you want to make yours by ruling them :  
your tactics must be to lower yourself to their level,  
and take particular care to make them suppose you  
exactly like themselves, and nothing further from  
your mind than meaning to teach them ; but dealing  
with woman, you must take quite a different plan.

"Try truth clean-opposite  
Such creep-and-crawl, stand forth all man and, might  
it chance,  
Somewhat of angel too ! . . . Your best self revealed  
at uttermost."

Hence—

"Elvire, Fifine, 'tis they" (women, not men) "convince  
unreasonable me

That I am, anyhow, a truth, though all else seem  
And be not. . . . Your steadying touch of hand  
Assists me to remain self-centred, fixed amid  
All on the move. Believe in me, at once you bid  
Myself believe that, since one soul has disengaged  
Mine from the shows of things, so much is fact: I  
waged

No foolish warfare, then, with shades, myself a  
shade,

Here in the world—may hope my pains will be repaid!  
How false things are, I judge: how changeable, I  
learn:

When, where, and how it is I shall see truth return,  
That I expect to know, because Fifine knows me!—  
How much more, if Elvire!

'And why not, only she?'

Why, *having* Elvire, do you still need Fifine? Why,  
instead of going on from the True and Permanent  
you have already gained to more True and Per-  
manent beyond, must you go back to get at your next  
Truth once more in the same way through the false  
and fleeting outside of things?

"Alack," he answers, "our life is lent,  
From first to last, the whole, for this experiment



Of proving what I say—that we ourselves are true !  
 I would there were one voyage, and then no more to  
 do

But tread the firmland, tempt the uncertain sea no  
 more.

. . . . .  
 I would the steady voyage, and not the fitful trip,—  
 Elvire, and not Fifine,—might test our seamanship.  
 But why expend one's breath to tell you, change of  
 boat

Means change of ~~tactics~~ too? . . .

Elvire is true as truth, honesty's self, alack !

The worse ! too safe the ship, the transport there and  
 back

Too certain ! one may loll and lounge and leave the  
 helm,"—

but what we are here for is to learn seamanship ;—

"Then, never grudge my poor Fifine her compliment !"

While we are here we are *meant* to use the False to  
 reach the True. Meanwhile—

"Thanks therefore to Fifine ! Elvire, I'm back with  
 you !

Share in the memories ! Embark I trust we shall  
 Together some fine day, and so, for good and all,  
 Bid Pornic Town adieu,—then, just the strait to cross,  
 And we reach harbour, safe, in Iostephanos !"

The time *will* come when we shall reach Truth by means of truth ; but it will only be when we leave earth's shores for good and all, with only the narrow sea to cross to the Harbour on the Other Side.

Here

"Life means—learning to abhor"

The false, and love the true, truth treasured snatch  
by snatch,

Waifs counted at their worth. And when with strays  
they match

I' the parti-coloured world,—when, under foul, shines  
fair,

And truth, displayed i' the point, flashes forth every-  
where

I' the circle, manifest to soul, though hid from sense,  
And no obstruction more affects this confidence,—

When faith is ripe for sight,—why, reasonably, then  
Comes the great clearing-up. Wait threescore years  
and ten !"

"Therefore it is," he says, "I prize stage-play, the  
honest cheating ;"

and therefore it was when the fife and drum bade the  
Fair commence, I bid you

"Link arm in arm with me,

Like husband and like wife, and so together see  
The tumbling-troop arrayed, the strollers on their stage  
Drawn up and under arms, and ready to engage.

And if I started thence upon abstruser themes—  
Well, 'twas a dream, pricked too !”

Then he goes on to describe a dream he had as he  
sat smoking by the open window after his noonday  
bathe. His mind, overburdened with crowding fancies  
from “this four-cornered world,”

“ Since  
Thought hankers after speech, while no speech may  
evince  
Feeling like music, . . . resolved to shift  
Its burthen to the back of some musician dead  
And gone, who feeling once what I feel now, instead  
Of words, sought sounds, and saved for ever, in the  
same,  
Truth that escapes prose,—nay, puts poetry to shame.”

The idea of the Fair suggests Schumann's “Car-  
nival,” and

“ I somehow played the piece : remarked on each old  
theme  
I' the new dress ; saw how food o' the soul . . . is  
purveyed  
Substantially the same from age to age, with change  
Of the outside only for successive feasters. . . .  
. . . And then—whatever weighed  
My eyes down, furred the films about my wits. . . .  
. . . . .

Howe'er it came to pass, I soon was far to fetch,—  
Gone off in company with Music !

Whither bound  
Except for Venice ? . . . who far below the perch  
Where I was pinnacled, showed, opposite, Mark's  
Church,  
And, underneath, Mark's square. . . .  
Since I gazed from above, however I got there."

What he found himself gazing at in his dream *But*

" Was a prodigious Fair,  
Concourse immense of men and women . . . but  
masked—

Always masked. . . . No face-shape, beast or bird,  
Nay, fish and reptile even, but someone had preferred

To make the vizard whence himself should view the  
world,

And where the world believed himself was manifest."

And—

" Mixed up among the rest  
. . . . Were masks to imitate  
Humanity's mishap."

Now it was—

" The wrinkled brow, bald pate,  
And rheumy eyes of Age ;"

now worse—

"Age reduced to simple greed and guile ;"

while perhaps

"The next revolting you was Youth,  
Stark ignorance and crude conceit."

These were the hard and sharp distinctions ; but  
besides these, he soon became aware there

"Flocked the infinite  
Of passions, loves and hates, man (pampers) till his  
mood  
Becomes himself, the whole sole face we name him  
by."

While he is asking himself why each soul should, in  
this way, be tasked by some "one love or else one  
hate," it suddenly occurred to him that—

"From all these sights beneath  
There rose not any sound : a crowd, yet dumb as  
death !  
But I know why. . . .

. . . They spoke ; but,—since on me devolved  
To see, and understand by sight,—the vulgar speech  
Might be dispensed with. 'He who cannot see, must  
reach

As best he may the truth of men by help of words  
They please to speak,' . . . so I thought."

But I—

“ ‘Seeing, know,  
And, knowing, can dispense with voice and vanity  
Of speech. What hinders then, that, drawing closer, I  
    . . . See and know better still  
These *simulachra*, . . .  
Down in the midst?’

And plump I pitched into the square.”

Here a curious result followed. The closer he got to  
them, the less monstrous appeared

“These faces that seemed but now so crooked  
And clawed away from God’s prime purpose. They  
    diverged  
A little from the type, but somehow rather urged  
To pity than disgust.”

Though—

“Still, at first sight, stood forth undoubtedly the fact  
*Some* deviation was. . . .

And presently I found  
That, just as ugliness had withered, so . . .  
. . . Perished off repugnance to what wrong  
Might linger yet i’ the make of man.”

Till at last it seemed to him that—

“Force, guile, were arms which earned  
My praise, not blame at all ! for we must learn to live,

Case-hardened at all points, not bare and sensitive,  
 But plated for defence, nay, furnished for attack,  
 With spikes at the due place, that neither front nor  
     back

May suffer in that squeeze with nature, we find—life.  
 Are we not here to learn the good of peace through  
     strife,  
 Of love through hate, and reach knowledge by  
     ignorance?

Why, those are *helps* thereto, which late we eyed  
     askance,  
 And nicknamed unaware!"

So he finds that—

“One must abate

One's scorn of the soul's case, distinct from the soul's  
     self,

Which is the centre-drop; whereas the pride in pelf,  
 The lust to seem the thing it cannot be, the greed  
 For praise, and all the rest seen outside,—these indeed  
 Are the hard polished cold crystal environment  
 Of those strange orbs unearthed i' the Druid temple,

Wherein you may admire one dew-drop roll and wink,  
 All unaffected by—quite alien to—what sealed  
 And saved it long ago: . . .

The solid surface-shield was outcome and result  
 Of simple dew at work to save itself amid

The unwatery force around ; protected thus, dew slid  
 Safe through all opposites impatient to absorb  
 Its spot of life, and lasts for ever in the orb  
 We, now, from hand to hand pass with impunity."

So the true Ideal ego may be even preserved by its  
 false outward seeming. Then he goes on to reflect

—"Experience, I am glad to master soon or late,  
 Here, there, and everywhere i' the world, without  
 debate !

Only, in Venice why ? What reason for Mark's Square  
 Rather than Timbuctoo ?"

Scarcely had the word escaped his lips when

"Swift ensued

In silence and by stealth, . . .

A formidable change of the amphitheatre  
 Which held the Carnival ;"

and

"There went

Conviction to my soul, that what I took of late  
 For Venice was the World ; its Carnival—the state  
 Of mankind, masquerade in life-long permanence  
 For all time, and no one particular feast-day."

Thence followed the discovery that could we see aright  
 there is in the world



"Just

Enough and not too much of hate, love, greed, and  
lust,

Could one discerningly but hold the balance, shift  
The weight from scale to scale, do justice to the drift  
Of nature, and explain the glories by the shames  
Mixed up in man! . . . only get close enough!  
—What was all this except the lesson of a life?

And—consequent upon the learning how from strife  
Grew peace,—from evil, good—came knowledge that,  
to get

Acquaintance with the way o' the world, we must not  
fret

Nor fume, on altitudes of self-sufficiency,  
But bid a frank farewell to what—we think—*should*  
be,

And, with as good a grace, welcome what *is*—we find

*Is*—for the hour, observe!"

For there is never-ceasing change in truth's present-  
ment, everywhere and in everything. Like the cloud-  
edifices of the sunset, the outward forms of Truth fade  
and melt into each other, and pass away; even things  
that we consider

"Fixed as fate, not fairy-work.

For those were temples, sure, which tremblingly grew  
blank,

From bright, then broke afresh in triumph,—ah, but  
     sank  
 As soon!"—

Nevertheless, one

                                "Gone, another fills the gap,  
 Serves the prime purpose so. . . .

  Religion stands at least  
 I' the temple-type."

For amid all the change

                                "Undoubtedly there spreads  
 Building around, above, which makes men lift their  
     heads,

                                'Commercing with the skies,' and not the pavement  
     in the Square."

But the learning, the science, the philosophy of one  
 age, where are they in the next?

                                "These vanish and are found  
*Nowhere*, by who tasks eye some twice within his  
     term  
 Of three-score years and ten, for tidings what each  
     germ

Has burgeoned out into, whereof the promise stunned  
 His ear with such acclaim."

One voice only never fails, and all it preaches is

“ ‘ Truth builds upon the sands,  
Though stationed on a rock : and so her work decays,  
And so she builds afresh, with like result. Nought  
stays

But just the fact that Truth not only *is*, but fain  
Would have men know she needs *must be*, by each so  
plain

Attempt to visibly inhabit where they dwell.’

Her works are work, while she is she ; that work does  
well

Which lasts mankind their lifetime through, and lets  
believe

One generation more, that, though sand run through  
sieve,

Yet earth now reached is rock, and what we moderns  
find

Erected here is Truth, who, ’stablished to her mind  
I’ the fulness of the days, will never change in show  
More than in substance erst : men *thought* they knew ;  
we *know* !

*Do you, my generation ? ”*

So—

“ Much as when the vault  
I’ the west,—wherein we watch the vapoury, manifold  
Transfiguration,—tired would turn to rest ”—

These passing manifestations of Truth all

"Fall at last  
Into a shape befits the close of things, and cast  
Palpably o'er vexed earth, heaven's mantle of repose.

. . . Edifice—shall I say,  
Died into edifice? I find no simpler way  
Of saying how, without or dash or shock or trace  
Of violence, I found unity in the place  
Of temple, tower, and hall and house and hut,—one  
blank  
Severity of death and peace."

But—

"What special blank did they agree to, all and each?  
What common shape was that wherein they mutely  
merged  
Likes and dislikes of form, so plain before?

I urged [he says to Elvire]  
Your step this way, prolonged our path of enterprise  
To where we stand at last, in order that your eyes  
Might see the very thing, and save my tongue describe  
The Druid monument which fronts you. . . .

How does it strike you, this construction gaunt and  
grey?

Sole object, these piled stones, that gleam unground  
away

By twilight's hungry jaw, which champs fine all be-  
side

I' the solitary waste we grope through. Oh, no guide  
However, need we now to reach the monstrous door  
Of granite! Take my word, the deeper you explore  
That caverned passage, filled with fancies to the brim,  
The less will you approve the adventure! such a grim  
Bar-sinister soon blocks abrupt your path, and ends  
All with a cold dread shape,—shape whereon Learning  
spends

Labour, and leaves the text obscurer for the gloss,  
While Ignorance reads right—recoiling from that  
Cross!

. . . . .  
To this it was, this same primæval monument,  
That, in my dream, I saw building with building blent  
Fall. . . .

. . . . As some imperial chord subsists,  
Steadily underlies the accidental mists  
Of music springing thence, that run their mazy race  
Around, and sink, absorbed, back to the triad base,—  
So, out of that one word, each variant rose and fell  
And left the same 'All's change, but permanence as  
well.'

—Grave note whence—list aloft!—harmonics sound,  
that mean,

'Truth inside, and outside, truth also ; and between  
 Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.  
 The individual soul works through the shows of sense,  
 (Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true),  
 Up to an outer Soul as individual too ;  
 And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,  
 And reach at length 'God, man, or both together  
 mixed,'

Transparent through the flesh, by parts which prove  
 a whole,

By hints which make the soul discernible by soul—  
 Let only soul look up, not down, not hate but love,  
 As truth successively takes shape, one grade above  
 Its last presentment, tempts as it were truth indeed  
 Revealed this time ; so tempts, till we attain to read  
 The signs aright, and learn, by failure, truth is forced  
 To manifest itself through falsehood ; whence divorced  
 By the excepted eye, at the rare season, for  
 The happy moment, truth instructs us to abhor  
 The false, and prize the true, obtainable thereby.  
 Then do we understand the value of a lie.  
 Its purpose served, its truth once safe deposited,  
 Each lie, superfluous now, leaves, in the singer's stead,  
 The indubitable Song.

. . . . .  
 Wherewith change ends. What other  
 change to dread  
 When, disengaged at last from every veil, instead

Of type remains the truth? Once—falsehood: but  
anon

*Theosuton e broteion eper kekramenon,*

[God, man, or both together mixed],

Something as true as soul is true, though veils be-  
tween

Are false and fleet away."

This once learned, the false has done its work, and  
we are done with it:—

"Wise, we want no more  
O' the fickle element. Enough of foam and roar!

. . . . .

Enter for good and all! then fate bolt fast the door,  
Shut you and me inside, never to wander more!"

Ah yes! but *can* that ever wholly be here? Can we,  
in this life, so anchor ourselves in the Permanent and  
the True, that we are out of range of attack or seduc-  
tion from the Passing and the False?

"No doubt" (he says), "the way I march, one idle  
arm, thrown slack

Behind me, leaves the open hand defenceless at the  
back,

Should an impertinent on tiptoe steal, and stuff

—Whatever can it be? A letter sure enough,

Pushed betwixt palm and glove!"

Perhaps that franc I gave Fifine had a yellow double yolk. I must go and see about it.

"Oh, threaten no farewell [Elvire], five minutes shall suffice

To clear the matter up. I go, and in a trice  
Return ; five minutes past, expect me !"

So the False and the Passing ever wins us again from the True and the Permanent, while we still inhabit this our home of clay. It is not till we can fairly

"Hie away from this old house,—  
Every crumbling brick embrowned with sin and shame,"

that the severance from the False and the Passing, and the union with the True and the Permanent, is complete. It is only in the epitaph on the tombstone that Elvire can wholly say—

"‘I end with—Love is all and Death is nought!’  
quoth She."



OF  
 "CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER-DAY."

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THESE two beautiful poems may be described as twin poems of the Christian life. "Christmas Eve" is the poem of the brightness of its dawning; "Easter-Day" the poem of its resurrection triumph, after the "Cross and passion" of its workaday hours. It is this link which binds the two into one.

In "Christmas Eve" the poet tells us how, when in youth he "entered God's church door, Nature leading him," his

"Soul brought all to a single test—  
 That He, the Eternal First and Last,  
 Who, in His power, had so surpassed  
 All man conceives of what is might,—  
 Whose wisdom, too, showed infinite,  
 —Would prove as infinitely good ;"

and it was in Christmas Eve, and the event it com-

memorates, he found the assurance his soul needed, in the Love of God incarnate. In "Easter-Day" he tells us, how, when the difficulties of the Christian life pressed sore upon him, it was in Easter-day, and the event it commemorates, he found the assurance his soul needed, that in taking up Christ's Cross, we are not asked to "renounce life for the sake of death, and nothing else." First, then,

### OF "CHRISTMAS EVE."

This poem is the record of a dream or vision, which the poet represents as having been shown to him while nodding in the pew of a little Dissenting chapel one Christmas Eve. The first two lines of the poem—

"Out of the little chapel I flung,  
Into the fresh night air again,"—

must be taken as the beginning of the dream, for the sequel shows that, in actual bodily fact, he was in the little chapel all the time,—

"How else was I found there, bolt-upright  
On my bench, as if I had never left it?  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
In short a spectator might have fancied  
That I had nodded betrayed by slumber,  
Yet kept my seat, a warning ghastly,

Through the heads of the sermon, nine in number,  
And woke up now at the tenth and lastly."

After the first two lines,—the prologue of the vision, as it were,—he goes back to explain how, in actual fact, he happened to find himself where he was.

He had been driven one Christmas Eve, by a storm of wind and rain, to take refuge in "the lath-and-plaster entry" of

" 'Mount Zion' with Love-lane at the back of it,"—

a little whitewashed Dissenting chapel on the edge of a half-built-on common, with a congregation drawn

"From a certain squalid knot of alleys,  
Where the town's bad blood once slept corruptly,  
Which now the little chapel rallies  
And leads into day again,—its priestliness  
Lending itself to hide their beastliness."

Then follows a masterly description of the arrival of the congregation, inimitable touches of human insight and pathos coming in every here and there in the midst of his half-comic disgust at their vulgarity and exclusiveness. One and all, they look askance at the chance visitor in their chapel's entry—

"Plain as print I read the glance  
At a common prey, in each countenance :  
'What, you, the alien, you have ventured

To take with us, the elect, your station?  
A carer for none of it, a Gallio?"

Till at last, when the very

"Flame of the single tallow candle  
In the cracked square lantern I stood under"

seemed to

"Shoot its blue lip at me, rebutting,  
As it were, the luckless cause of scandal:

. . . . .  
There was no standing it much longer.

'Good folks,' thought I, as resolve grew stronger,  
'This way you perform the Grand-Inquisitor,  
When the weather sends you a chance visitor?  
*You* are the men, and wisdom shall die with you,  
And none of the old Seven Churches vie with you!

. . . . .  
I prefer, if you please, for my expounder  
Of the laws of the feast, the feast's own Founder;  
Mine's the same right with your poorest and sickliest,  
Supposing I don the marriage-vestment."

So he sets his elbow spikewise at the shutting door,  
and finds himself

"In full conventicle,  
—To wit, in Zion Chapel Meeting,  
On the Christmas-Eve of 'Forty-nine."

Then follows the account of the sermon, with its

“Pig-of-lead-like pressure  
Of the preaching-man’s immense stupidity,  
. . . . .  
. . . A patchwork of chapters and texts in severance,”  
while

“The flock sat on, divinely flustered,  
The shoemaker’s lad, discreetly choking,  
Kept down his cough. ’Twas too provoking!  
My gorge rose at the nonsense and stuff of it,  
So, saying, like Eve when she plucked the apple,  
‘I wanted a taste, and now there’s enough of it,’  
I flung out of the little chapel.”

As I have already said, this flinging out of the little chapel was not an actual physical fact, but the beginning of the dream which the poem records. In his dream, then, he finds himself out of the chapel, walking across the common, in a lull of the wind and the rain, under the risen moon of which he catches flying glimpses through

“The ramparted cloud-prison,  
Block on block built up in the West,”  
his mind full of the scene he has left—

“That placid flock, that pastor vociferant,  
—How this outside was pure and different !”

and mentally criticising the sermon—

"The sermon, now—what a mingled weft  
Of good and ill! . . .

. . . Alas for the excellent earnestness,  
And the truths, quite true if stated succinctly,  
But as surely false, in their quaint presentment,  
However to pastor and flock's contentment!

. . . How could you know them, grown double their  
size

In the natural fog of the good man's mind,  
Like yonder spots of our roadside lamps  
Haloed about with the common's damps?  
Truth remains true, the fault's in the prover;  
The zeal was good, and the aspiration;  
And yet, and yet, yet, fifty times over,  
Pharaoh received *no* demonstration  
By his Baker's dream of Baskets Three,  
Of the doctrine of the Trinity."

Then he goes on to inquire how what profited him  
so little seemed to appeal so powerfully to the preacher's  
flock—

"These people have really felt, no doubt  
A something, the motion they style the Call of them;  
And this is their method of bringing about

. . .  
A sort of reviving or reproducing

Of the mood itself, that strengthens by using.

. . . For me,

I have my own church equally :

And in *this* church my faith sprang first !

. . . God speeding me,

I entered His church-door, Nature leading me ;

In youth I looked to these very skies,

And probing their immensities,

I found God there, His visible power ;

Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense

Of that power, an equal evidence

That His love, there too, was the nobler dower.

For the loving worm within its clod

Were diviner than a loveless god

Amid his worlds, I will dare to say."

Love is so much higher a thing than power, that the meanest creature who had love would be diviner than the greatest without it. Therefore,—his argument is,—the love that I find in my own heart *must* be in God's heart too, otherwise I would be diviner than God. Then, as if afraid of being misunderstood, he says—

" You know what I mean : God's all, man's nought."

Yet God's plan in making man is to stand off from him, as it were, to give him " a place apart " wherein to use

" His gifts of brain and heart,

Given, indeed, but to keep for ever."

Man's very own—

" To create man and then leave him  
Able, His own word saith, to grieve Him,  
But able to glorify Him too,  
As a mere machine could never do."

Man then standing

" On his own stock  
Of love and power as a pin-point rock,"

and looking at God's power, sees in it only excess by  
a million-fold over the power God gives to himself.  
But Love is in its own nature infinite—

" Love is the ever-springing fountain :  
Man may enlarge or narrow his bed  
For the water's play, but the water-head—  
How can he multiply or reduce it ?

. . . . .  
So, gazing up, in my youth, at love,

. . . . .  
My soul brought all to a single test—  
That He, the Eternal First and Last,  
Who, in His power, had so surpassed  
All man conceives of what is might,—  
Whose wisdom, too, showed infinite  
—Would prove as infinitely good ;  
Would never (my soul understood),  
With power to work all love desires,



Bestow e'en less than man requires.

. . . . .  
And show that God had yet to learn  
What the meanest human creature needed,—  
Not life, to wit, for a few short years,  
Tracking His way through doubts and fears.

. . . . .  
No! *love* which, on earth, amid all the shows of it,  
Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,  
The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,  
Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it!  
And I shall behold Thee, face to face,  
O God, and in Thy light retrace  
How in all I loved here, still wast Thou!  
Whom pressing to, then, as I fain would now,  
I shall find as able to satiate  
The love, Thy gift, as my spirit's wonder  
Thou art able to quicken and sublimiate,  
With this sky of Thine, that I now walk under,

. . . . .  
. . . Oh, let men keep their ways  
Of seeking Thee in a narrow shrine—  
Be this my way! And this *is* mine!"

What his soul needs to find in God is a love as infinite as His power and His wisdom—a love that shall satisfy when earth shall be no more, and rise perfected beyond death and the grave. But what assurance has he of this?

"Suddenly

The rain and the wind ceased, and the sky  
Received at once the full fruition  
Of the moon's consummate apparition.

. . . While, bare and breathless,  
North and South and East lay ready  
For a glorious Thing, that, dauntless, deathless,  
Sprang across them, and stood steady.  
'Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect,

Above which intervened the night.  
But above night too, . . .  
Another rainbow rose, a mightier,  
Fainter, flushier, and flightier,—  
Rapture dying along its verge !  
Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge,  
WHOSE, from the straining topmost dark,  
On to the keystone of that arc ?"

The vision is the answer to his former question, and  
the foot that emerges on to the keystone of the arc of  
God's glory is the human foot of Christ.

" This sight was shown me, there and then,—  
Me, one out of a world of men,  
Singled forth, as the chance might hap  
To another, if in a thunderclap

Where I heard noise, and you saw flame,  
Some one man knew God called his name.  
For me, I think I said, 'Appear !  
Good were it to be ever here.  
If Thou wilt, let me build to Thee  
Service tabernacles Three.  
Where, forever in Thy presence,  
In ecstatic acquiescence,  
Far alike from thriftless learning  
And ignorance's undiscerning,  
I may worship and remain !'

. . . . .  
All at once I looked up with terror.  
*He* was there.  
He Himself with His human air,  
On the narrow pathway, just before.  
I saw the back of Him, no more—  
He had left the chapel, then, as I.  
I forgot all about the sky.  
No face : only the sight  
Of a sweepy garment, vast and white,  
With a hem that I could recognise.  
I felt terror, no surprise :  
My mind filled with the cataract,  
At one bound, of the mighty fact.  
' I remember, He did say  
Doubtless, that, to this world's end,

Where two or three should meet and pray,  
 He would be in the midst, their friend:  
 Certainly He was there with them.' "

But then comes the terror :—

" And I hastened, cried out while I pressed  
 To the salvation of the vest,  
 ' But not so, Lord ! It cannot be  
 That Thou, indeed, art leaving me—  
 Me, that have despised Thy friends.  
 Did my heart make no amends ?  
 Thou art the Love of God—above  
 His power, didst hear me place His love,  
 And that was leaving the world for Thee.  
 Therefore Thou must not turn from me  
 As I had chosen the other part.

. . . . .  
 I thought it best that Thou, the Spirit,  
 Be worshipped in spirit and in truth,  
 And in beauty, as even we require it—  
 Not in the forms burlesque, uncouth,  
 I left but now, as scarcely fitted  
 For Thee : I knew not what I pitied.  
 But, all I felt there, right or wrong,  
 What is it to Thee, who curest sinning ?  
 Am I not weak as Thou art strong ?  
 I have looked to Thee from the beginning,  
 Straight up to Thee through all the world.

. . . . .

But if Thou leavest me——'

Less or more,

I suppose that I spoke thus.

When, have mercy, Lord, on us !

The whole Face turned upon me full.

And I spread myself beneath it,

As when the bleacher spreads, to seethe it

In the cleansing sun, his wool,—

Steeps in the flood of noontide whiteness

Some defiled, discoloured web—

So lay I, saturate with brightness.

And when the flood appeared to ebb,

Lo, I was walking, light and swift,

. . . Caught up in the whirl and drift

Of the vesture's amplitude, still eddying

On, just before me, still to be followed,

As it carried me after with its motion :

What shall I say ?—as a path were hollowed

And a man went weltering through the ocean,

Sucked along in the flying wake

Of the luminous water-snake."

And reflecting to himself at intervals—

" 'So He said, so it befalls.

God who registers the cup

Of mere cold water, for His sake

To a disciple rendered up,

Disdains not His own thirst to slake

At the poorest love was ever offered :  
And because my heart I proffered,  
With true love trembling at the brim,  
He suffers me to follow Him  
For ever, my own way.' . . .

And so we crossed the world and stopped ;"—  
and he finds himself outside St Peter's at Rome, but  
with power to see all that goes on inside :—

"The whole Basilica alive !  
Men in the chancel, body, and nave,  
Men on the pillars' architrave,  
Men on the statues, men on the tombs  
With popes and kings in their porphyry wombs,  
All famishing in expectation  
Of the main-altar's consummation."

Yet he was left outside the door, doubting with himself and questioning—

"Why sat I here on the threshold-stone,  
Left till He return, alone  
Save for the garment's extreme fold  
Abandoned still to bless my hold ?"

Then reason replies to his doubt—

"Yes, I said—that He will go  
And sit with these in turn, I know.  
Their faith's heart beats, though her head swims

Too giddily to guide her limbs.

. . . . .  
 But *I*, a mere man, fear to quit  
 The clue God gave me as most fit  
 To guide my footsteps through life's maze,  
 Because Himself discerns all ways  
 Open to reach Him. . . .  
 He will not bid me enter too,  
 But rather sit, as now I do,  
 Awaiting His return outside.  
 —'Twas thus my reason straight replied,  
 And joyously I turned, and pressed  
 The garment's skirt upon my breast,  
 Until, afresh its light suffusing me,  
 My heart cried 'What has been abusing me  
 That I should wait here lonely and coldly,  
 Instead of rising, entering boldly,  
 Baring Truth's face, and letting drift  
 Her veils of lies as they choose to shift?  
 Do these men praise Him? I will raise  
 My voice up to their point of praise!  
 I see the error; but above  
 The scope of error, see the love.'—

Then follows an apostrophe:—

"Oh, Love of those first Christian days!"

that had power to dethrone the antique sovereign  
 Intellect, and with Greece and Rome in ken taught

men to abhor poetry, rhetoric, sculpture, painting,  
music. For

"Love was the startling thing, the new ;  
Love was the all-sufficient too ;  
And seeing that, you see the rest :  
As a babe can find its mother's breast  
As well in darkness as in light,  
Love shut our eyes, and all seemed right."

And he concludes that, on the whole, mistaken as the  
sacrifice is, it is rather a thing to be proud of that—

"With all Rome here, whence to levy  
Such contributions to their appetite,  
With women and men in a gorgeous bevy,  
They take, as it were, a padlock, clap it tight  
On their southern eyes, . . .  
And, all these loves, late struggling incessant,  
. . . . .  
They offer up to God for a present."

So he sums up his new resolves—

"Too much love there can never be.  
And where the intellect devolves  
Its function on love exclusively,  
I, a man who possesses both,  
Will accept the provision, nothing loth,  
Will feast my love, then depart elsewhere,  
That my intellect may find its share ;"



applauding the while the great heart of the artist, who has turned all his block of marble into a grand notion of what a face may be ; and then go off on my spirit-travels to find some other artist of another ambition, who thought that to begin at the feet was best !—

“For so may I see, ere I die, the whole figure !”

Now again he finds himself caught up—

“In the whirl and drift  
Of the vesture’s amplitude ;”

and again left alone—

“Alone ! I am left alone once more—  
(Save for the garment’s extreme fold  
Abandoned still to bless my hold)  
Alone, beside the entrance-door  
Of a sort of temple,—perchance a college,”

in a—

“Tall, old, quaint, irregular town !  
It may be—though *which*, I can’t affirm—any  
Of the famous middle-age towns of Germany.

. . . . .  
Through the open door I catch obliquely  
Glimpses of a lecture-hall ;  
And not a bad assembly neither—  
Ranged decent and symmetrical  
On benches, waiting what’s to see there ;

Which, holding still by the vesture's hem,  
I also resolve to see with them,  
Cautious this time how I suffer to slip  
The chance of joining in fellowship  
With any that call themselves His friends,  
As these folks do, I have a notion."

Then follows the inimitable description of the lecturer—

"The hawk-nosed, high-cheek-boned Professor,  
Three parts sublime to one grotesque.  
I felt at once as if there ran  
A shoot of love from my heart to the man—  
That sallow, virgin-minded, studious  
Martyr to mild enthusiasm,  
As he uttered a kind of cough-preludious  
That woke my sympathetic spasm,  
(Beside some spitting that made me sorry)  
And stood, surveying his auditory  
With a wan pure look, wellnigh celestial,—  
Those blue eyes had survived so much !  
. . . Pushed back higher his spectacles,  
Let the eyes stream out like lamps from cells,  
And giving his head of hair—a hake  
Of undressed tow, for colour and quantity—  
One rapid and impatient shake,  
The Professor's grave voice, sweet though hoarse,  
Broke into his Christmas-Eve's discourse."

Then follows the discourse :—

"He proposed inquiring first  
 Into the various sources whence  
 This Myth of Christ is derivable  
 (Since plainly no such life was liveable).

. . . . .

Whether 'twere best opine Christ was,  
 Or never was at all, or whether  
 He was and was not, both together—  
 It matters little for the name,  
 So the idea be left the same.  
 Only, for practical purpose' sake,  
 'Twas obviously well to take  
 The popular story. . . .  
 Which, when reason had strained and abated it  
 Of foreign matter, left, for residuum,  
 A Man !—a right true man, however,  
 Whose work was worthy a man's endeavour :  
 Work, that gave warrant almost sufficient  
 To his disciples, for rather believing  
 He was just omnipotent and omniscient,  
 As it gives to us, for as frankly receiving  
 His word, their tradition,—which, though it meant  
 Something entirely different  
 From all that those who only heard it,  
 In their simplicity thought and averred it,  
 Had yet a meaning quite as respectable :

For, among other doctrines delectable,  
 Was he not surely the first to insist on  
 The natural sovereignty of our race?"—

Here, in a pause of the lecture—

"I seized the occasion of bidding adieu to him,  
 The vesture still within my hand.

I could interpret its command.  
 This time He would not bid me enter  
 The exhausted air-bell of the Critic.  
 Truth's atmosphere may grow mephitic  
 When Papist struggles with Dissenter.  
 Each, that thus sets the pure air seething,  
 May poison it for healthy breathing—  
 But the Critic leaves no air to poison.

. . . . .

Thus much of Christ, does he reject?  
 And what retain? His intellect?  
 What is it I must reverence duly?  
 Poor intellect for worship, truly,  
 Which tells me simply what was told  
 (If mere morality, bereft  
 Of the God in Christ, be all that's left)  
 Elsewhere by voices manifold;  
 With this advantage, that the stater  
 Made nowise the important stumble  
 Of adding, he, the sage and humble,

Was also one with the Creator.

. . . . .  
 Christ's goodness, then—does that fare better?  
 Strange goodness, which upon the score  
 Of being goodness, the mere due  
 Of man to fellow-man, much more  
 To God,—should take another view  
 Of its possessor's privilege,  
 And bid him rule his race.

. . . . . They, you and I  
 Are sheep of a good man! and why?

. . . . .  
 I would praise such a Christ, with pride  
 And joy, that he, as none beside,  
 Had taught us how to keep the mind  
 God gave him, as God gave his kind,  
 Freer than they from fleshly taint:  
 I would call such a Christ our Saint,  
 As I declare our Poet, him  
 Whose insight makes all others dim."

Yet—

"No nearer Something, by a jot,  
 Rise an infinity of Nothings  
 Than one: take Euclid for your teacher:  
 Distinguish kinds: do crownings, clothings,  
 Make that Creator which was creature?  
 Multiply gifts upon man's head,

And what, when all's done, shall be said  
But—the more gifted he, I ween !”

Eliminate the “God in Christ,” and you leave nothing worthy of even the worship these people were prepared to give Him ; for however great His intellect or His goodness, they were simply gifts of Another—

“ From the gift looking to the Giver,  
And from the cistern to the River,  
And from the finite to Infinity,  
And from man's dust to God's divinity.

. . . . .  
Take all in a word : the truth in God's breast  
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed :  
Though He is so bright and we are so dim,  
We are made in His image to witness Him ” ;

—therefore, because made in God's image, the worst man on earth knows more of what is right—

“ Than arrives at birth  
In the best man's acts that we bow before.”

Hence he concludes that—

“ The real God-function  
Is to furnish a motive and injunction  
For practising what we know already.”

Are you willing, then, he asks, to waive such a

motive as the Love of God in Christ? What is the point Christ Himself lays stress on? Does He say—

“ ‘ Believe in Good,  
In Justice, Truth, now understood  
For the first time ? ’—or, ‘ Believe in ME,  
Who lived and died, yet essentially  
Am Lord of Life ? ’ Whoever can take  
The same to his heart and for mere love’s sake  
Conceive of the love,—that man obtains  
A new truth ; no conviction gains  
Of an old one only, made intense  
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.”

Yet nevertheless—

“ Can it be that He stays inside ?  
Is the vesture left me to commune with ?  
Could my soul find aught to sing in tune with,  
Even at this lecture, if she tried ?  
Oh, let me at lowest sympathise,  
With the lurking drop of blood that lies  
In the desiccated brain’s white roots  
Without a throb for Christ’s attributes,  
As the lecturer makes his special boast !  
If Love’s dead there, it has left a ghost.  
Admire we . . .  
. . . How when the Critic had done his best,  
And the Pearl of Price, at reason’s test,

Lay dust and ashes levigable  
 On the Professor's lecture-table ;  
 When we looked for the inference and monition  
 That our faith, reduced to such condition,  
 Be swept forthwith to its natural dust-hole, —  
 He bids us, when we least expect it,  
 Take back our faith,—if it be not just whole,  
 Yet a pearl indeed, as his tests affect it.

. . . . .  
 So, prize we our dust and ashes accordingly !  
 ' Go home and venerate the myth  
 I thus have experimented with—  
 This man, continue to adore him  
 Rather than all who went before him,  
 And all who ever followed after !'  
 Surely for this I may praise you, my brother !  
 Will you take the praise in tears or laughter ?  
 That's one point gained : can I compass another ?  
 Unlearned love was safe from spurning—  
 Can't we respect your loveless learning ? "

So he goes on quite contentedly congratulating himself—

" This tolerance is a genial mood !  
 . . . . .  
 One sees, each side, the good effects of it,  
 A value for religion's self,  
 A carelessness about the sects of it.



Let me enjoy my own conviction,  
 Not watch my neighbour's faith with fretfulness.

. . . . .  
 Better a mild indifferentism,

. . . . .  
 Where I may see Saint, Savage, Sage  
 Fuse their respective creeds in one  
 Before the general Father's throne !"

But what is this that happens?—

" —'Twas the horrible storm began afresh !  
 The black night caught me in his mesh,  
 Whirled me up, and flung me prone.  
 I looked, and far there, ever fleeting  
 Far, far away, the receding gesture,  
 And looming of the lessening vesture !—  
 Swept forward from my stupid hand,  
 While I watched my foolish heart expand  
 In the lazy glow of benevolence,  
 O'er the various modes of man's belief.  
 I sprang up with fear's vehemence.  
 ' Needs must there be one way, our chief  
 Best way of worship : let me strive  
 To find it, and when found, contrive  
 My fellows also take their share !  
 This constitutes my earthly care :  
 God's is above it and distinct.

. . . No gain

That I experience, must remain  
 Unshared : but should my best endeavour  
 To share it, fail—subsisteth ever  
 God's care above, and I exult  
 That God, by God's own ways occult,  
 May—doth, I will believe—bring back  
 All wanderers to a single track.  
 Meantime, I can but testify  
 God's care for me—no more, can I—  
 It is but for myself I know ;

. . . . .  
 Have I been sure, this Christmas-Eve,  
 God's own hand did the rainbow weave,  
 Whereby the truth from heaven slid  
 Into my soul?—I cannot bid  
 The world admit He stooped to heal  
 My soul, as if in a thunder-peal  
 Where one heard noise, and one saw flame,  
 I only knew He named my name :  
 But what is the world to me, for sorrow  
 Or joy in its censure, when to-morrow  
 It drops the remark, with just-turned head  
 Then, on again, "That man is dead"?  
 Yes, but for me—my name called,—drawn  
 As a conscript's lot from the lap's black yawn,  
 He has dipt into on a battle-dawn :  
 Bid out of life by a nod, a glance,—

. . . . .

Summoned, a solitary man,  
 To end his life where his life began,  
 From the safe glad rear, to the dreadful van !  
 Soul of mine, hadst thou caught and held  
 By the hem of the vesture !—

And I caught  
 At the flying robe, and unrepelled  
 Was lapped again in its folds full-fraught  
 With warmth and wonder and delight,  
 God's mercy being infinite.  
 For scarce had the words escaped my tongue,  
 When, at a passionate bound, I sprung  
 Out of the wandering world of rain,  
 Into the little chapel again.

How else was I found there, bolt-upright  
 On my bench, as if I had never left it ?

For the Vision, *that* was true, I wist,  
 True as that heaven and earth exist."

For himself, he has

" Attained to think  
 My heart does best to receive in meekness  
 That mode of worship, as most to His mind,  
 Where earthly aids being cast behind,  
 His All in All appears serene  
 With the thinnest human veil between,  
 Letting the mystic lamps, the seven,

The many motions of His spirit,  
 Pass, as they list, from earth to heaven."

As—

"For the preacher's merit or demerit,  
 It were to be wished the flaws were fewer  
 In the earthen vessel, holding treasure,  
 Which lies as safe in a golden ewer;  
 But the main thing is, does it hold good measure?  
 Heaven soon sets right all other matters!—  
 Ask, else, these ruins of humanity,

Who thence take comfort, can I doubt,  
 Which an empire gained, were a loss without.  
 May it be mine! And let us hope  
 That no worse blessing befall the Pope,  
 Turned sick at last of the day's buffoonery.

Nor may the Professor forego its peace  
 At Göttingen, presently, when, in the dusk  
 Of his life, if his cough, as I fear, should increase,  
 Prophesied of by that horrible husk—  
 When thicker and thicker the darkness fills  
 The world through his misty spectacles,  
 And he gropes for something more substantial  
 Than a fable, myth, or personification,—  
 May Christ do for him, what no mere man shall,  
 And stand confessed as the God of salvation!

Meantime, in the still recurring fear  
 Lest myself, at unawares, be found,  
 While attacking the choice of my neighbours round,  
 With none of my own made—I choose here !  
 The giving out of the hymn reclaims me ;  
 I have done !—and if any blames me,

. . . . .  
 I praise the heart, and pity the head of him,  
 And refer myself to *THEE*, instead of him,  
 Who head and heart alike discernest.

. . . . .  
 I put up pencil and join chorus  
 To Hepzibah Tune, without further apology,  
 The last five verses of the third section  
 Of the seventeenth hymn of Whitfield's Collection,  
 To conclude with the doxology."

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OF "EASTER-DAY."

The form of the companion poem of "Easter-Day" is that of a conversation between the poet and an imaginary interlocutor within his own mind, and its first words are the poet's exclamation—

"How very hard it is to be  
 A Christian !"

Not only the task of realising Christianity up to its Ideal, for it is always hard to realise any Ideal completely,—but hard even to realise it with the moderate success with which we can generally carry out our aims in life.

“ ‘This aim is greater,’ you will say.”

Yes ; but the importance of an aim always proves a proportional encouragement to effort. “Then,” suggests the interlocutor,

“ ‘What if it be God’s intent  
That labour to this one result  
Should prove unduly difficult ?’

Ah, that’s a question in the dark,”

says the poet—

“And the sole thing that I remark  
Upon the difficulty, this ;  
We do not see it where it is,  
At the beginning of the race :  
As we proceed, it shifts its place,  
And when we looked for crowns to fall,  
We find the tug’s to come,—that’s all !”

At first you say the chief difficulty is belief that we have indeed an authentic revelation of God’s will : could I only once believe this thoroughly, all the rest were simple.

"Prove to me only that the least  
 Command of God is God's indeed,  
 And what injunction shall I need  
 To pay obedience? Death so nigh,  
 When time must end, eternity  
 Begin,—and cannot I compute,  
 Weigh loss and gain together, . . .  
 . . . Give my body to be sawn  
 Asunder, hacked in pieces, tied  
 To horses, stoned, burned, crucified,  
 Like any martyr of the list?  
 How gladly!—if I make acquist,  
 Through the brief minute's fierce annoy,  
 Of God's eternity of joy."

"And certainly," the poet says,

"You name the point  
 Whereon all turns: for could you joint  
 This flexile finite life once tight  
 Into the fixed and infinite,  
 You, safe inside, would spurn what's out  
 With carelessness enough, no doubt."

But come to the next stage of your reasonings, and you don't see the path quite so clear. Unquestionably, you say, a possibility of doubt is necessary to the very existence of faith:—

"You must mix some uncertainty  
 With faith, if you would have faith be."

Faith *means* just seeing behind the outward face of a thing to the reality it hides,—it is by their faith in us, or their want of it, that we count people our friends or our foes—

“Your mistress saw your spirit’s grace,  
When, turning from the ugly face,  
I found belief in it too hard ;  
And she and I had our reward.”

But why should *God* require faith from us? Surely He doesn’t need our faith to judge us by? It is all very well for us weak beings to

“Try with faith the foes and friends ;  
—But God, bethink you !”

I would fain think of His reign as based upon *exacter* laws—

“In all God’s acts—(as Plato cries  
He doth)—He *should* geometrise.”

Oh, I see! says the poet; you would like a mathematical certainty about God,—a world in which there was no *need* for faith! But *is* it so!—

“The whole creation travails, groans,—  
Contrive your music from its moans !”

Be sincere; you come back from the world (where *we* think there once was, and still is, a living oracle, whose answers you stood carping at) with all your questions



about God “unanswered flat”; questions impossible indeed to us, who are persuaded our earth *has* speech of God’s—

“Which one fact frees us from the yoke  
Of guessing why He never spoke.”

Well, then, you acknowledge that God *does* require faith from us, and as a *scientific* faith would be a contradiction in terms, you will be content to base your faith upon a probability—

“But, *probable*; the chance must lie  
Clear on one side.”

Had you this, you think you would not find it hard to be a Christian.

“Renounce the world !  
Were that a mighty hardship ?”

Why, people do it every day for all sorts of trifling aims!—

“One friend of mine wears out his eyes,  
In patient hope that, ten years hence,  
‘Somewhat completer,’ he may say,  
‘My list of *coleoptera*!’  
While just the other who most laughs  
At him, above all epitaphs  
Aspires to have his tomb describe  
Himself as Sole among the tribe

Of snuffbox-fanciers, who possessed  
A Grignon with the Regent's crest.

I shall be doing that alone,  
To gain a palm-branch and a throne,  
Which fifty people undertake  
To do, and gladly, for the sake  
Of giving a Semitic guess,  
Or playing pawns at blindfold chess."

Well then, if sufficient probable evidence is all you  
want, look about for it and it will be found doubtless.

"As is your sort of mind,  
So is your sort of search ;—you'll find  
What you desire, and that's to be  
A Christian. . . .  
You wanted to believe ; your pains  
Are crowned—you do : and what remains ?  
'Renounce the world !'—Ah, were it done  
By merely cutting one by one  
Your limbs off, with your wise head last,  
How easy were it,—how soon past  
If once in the believing mood !"

says the poet.

" ' Such is man's usual gratitude,  
Such thanks to God do we return,  
For not exacting that we spurn

A single gift of life, forego  
One real gain,—only taste them so  
With gravity and temperance,  
That those mild virtues may enhance  
Such pleasures, rather than abstract—  
Last spice of which, will be the fact  
Of love discerned in every gift."

While, when

" 'Sorrows and privations take  
The place of joy,—the thing that seems  
Mere misery under human schemes,  
Becomes, regarded by the light  
Of love, as very near or quite  
As good a gift as joy before.' "

"Do you say this or I?" asks the poet. "Oh, you!"  
(Note that it *might* have been said by either the poet  
or his interlocutor, only from different points of view.  
As the interlocutor claims it, the poet goes on to con-  
test it, *as said from the interlocutor's standpoint.*)  
Then you really think, says the poet,

"That the Eternal and Divine  
Did, eighteen centuries ago,  
In very truth—— Enough! you know  
The all-stupendous tale,—that Birth,  
That Life, that Death! And all, the earth  
Shuddered at,—all, the heavens grew black

Rather than see : . . .

. . . All took place, you think,  
Only to give our joys a zest,  
And prove our sorrows for the best ?  
We differ, then ! . . . I, still pale  
And heartstruck at the dreadful tale,"

could well concede that, as one implicated in that deed,  
if God

"Blacked out in a blot  
My brief life's pleasantness, 'twere not  
So very disproportionate."

Or, on the other hand, I could conceive that He might  
save

"At that Day's price,  
The impure in their impurities :  
. . . . .  
But there be certain words, broad, plain,  
Uttered again and yet again,  
Hard to mistake, or overgloss—  
Announcing this world's gain for loss,  
And bidding us reject the same.  
. . . . .

Turn a deaf ear, if you think fit,  
But I, who thrill in every nerve  
At thought of what deaf ears deserve,—  
How do you counsel in the case ?

'I'd take, by all means, in your place,'"

the interlocutor replies,

" 'The safe side, since it so appears ;  
Deny myself, a few brief years,  
The natural pleasure, leave the fruit,  
Or cut the plant up by the root.' "

Ah ! that's reversal to the old point, says the poet,—

" ('Tis just this I bring you to.) "

But what

" If after all we should mistake,  
And so *renounce life for the sake*  
*Of death and nothing else* " ?

The friends we jeered at might well send the jeer back  
to ourselves then :—

" 'There *were* my beetles to collect !'  
'My box—a trifle, I confess,  
But here I hold it, ne'ertheless !' "

While where is what *you* renounced the world for ?—

" Poor idiots, (let us pluck up heart  
And answer) we, the better part  
Have chosen, though 'twere *only* hope,—  
Nor envy moles like you that grope  
Amid your veritable muck.

. . . . .

Thus the contemner we contemn,—  
And, when doubt strikes us, thus we ward

Its stroke off, caught upon our guard,  
 —Not struck enough to overturn  
 Our faith, but shake it—make us learn  
 What I began with, and, I wis  
 End, having proved,—how hard it is  
 To be a Christian !”

“Small thanks,” says the interlocutor,

“‘For taking pains  
 To make it hard to me. . . .  
 . . . Here I live  
 In trusting ease ; and here you drive  
 At causing me to lose what most  
 Yourself would mourn for had you lost !’”

“But,” says the poet,

“Do you see, my friend, that thus  
 You leave St Paul for Æschylus ?  
 —Who made his Titan’s arch-device  
 The giving men *blind hopes* to spice  
 The meal of life with.”

But now, suppose

“Faith should be, as I allege,”

something

“Quite *other* than a condiment  
 To heighten flavours with ?”

So, in order to prove that no mere foppery made him speak as he had done, the poet resolves to tell a vision he had—

“As solemn, strange  
And dread a thing as in the range  
Of facts,—or fancies, if God will—  
E’er happened to our kind. . . .

### . . . Whence

It comes that every Easter-night  
As now, I sit up, watch, till light,  
Upon those chimney-stacks and roofs,  
Give, through my window-pane, grey proofs  
That Easter-day is breaking slow.  
On such a night three years ago,  
It chanced that I had cause to cross  
The common, where the chapel was.

• • • • •

I fell to musing of the time  
So close, the blessed matin-prime  
All hearts leap up at, in some guise.

. . . I overwent

Much the same ground of reasoning  
As you and I just now. One thing  
Remained, however—one that tasked  
My soul to answer ; and I asked,  
Fairly and frankly, what might be  
That History, that Faith, to *me*.

• • • • •

'How were *my* case, now, did I fall  
Dead here, this minute—should I lie  
Faithful or faithless?' "

From childhood it was always so with him, he explains,  
—he must look things in the face and know the worst  
of them. If there might be a murderer behind a closet  
door, he must look and see, despite his old nurse's  
remonstrance that if the murderer *were* there, by look-  
ing he would only be killed a little sooner on the floor,  
so "losing one night's sleep the more!"

However, this time it appeared, "the closet penned  
no such assassin," but instead Common Sense peeped  
out as a comforting friend, saying—

" 'Soberly now,—who  
Should be a Christian if not you?'  
(Hear how he smoothed me down.) 'One takes  
A whole life, sees what course it makes  
Mainly, and not by fits and starts' "—

and, looking at yours,

" 'I find, 'mid dangers manifold,  
—Through baffling senses passionate,  
Fancies as restless,—with a freight  
Of knowledge cumbersome enough  
To sink your ship when waves grow rough.—  
The good bark answers to the helm  
Where faith sits, easier to o'erwhelm



Than some stout peasant's heavenly guide,  
More happy ! But shall we award  
Less honour to the hull which, dogged  
By storms, a mere wreck, waterlogged,  
Masts by the board, her bulwarks gone,  
And stanchions going, yet bears on,—  
Than to mere life-boats, built to save,  
And triumph o'er the breaking wave ?”

Ah ! but, says the poet,

“ ‘ Would the ship reached home !  
I wish indeed “ God’s kingdom come—”  
The day when I shall see appear  
His bidding, as my duty, clear  
From doubt ! And it shall dawn, that day,  
Some future season ; Easter may  
Prove, not impossibly, the time—  
Yes, that were striking . . .  
. . . Easter-morn, to bring  
The Judgment ! ’ ”

But it must be an Easter deeper in the spring than  
this one, when snow still caps the hills—

“ ‘ For earth must show  
All signs of meaning to pursue  
Her tasks as she was wont to do ;  
—The skylark, taken by surprise  
As we ourselves, shall recognise

Sudden the end. For suddenly  
It comes ; the dreadfulness must be  
In that ; all warrants the belief—  
" At night it cometh like a thief."  
I fancy why the trumpet blows ;  
—Plainly, to wake one. From repose  
We shall start up, at last awake  
From life, that insane dream we take  
For waking now.' "

And as when now we waken from dreams, we wonder  
why we let slip such chances—

“ ‘ Just

A bridge to cross, a dwarf to thrust  
Aside, a wicked mage to stab—  
And, lo ye, I had kissed Queen Mab !’  
So shall we marvel why we grudged  
Our labour here, and idly judged  
Of heaven, we might have gained, but lose !  
Lose ? Talk of loss, and I refuse  
To plead at all ! You speak no worse  
Nor better than my ancient nurse  
When she would tell me in my youth  
I well deserved that shapes uncouth  
Should fright and tease me in my sleep :—  
Why could I not in memory keep  
Her precept for the evil’s cure ?

'Pinch your own arm, boy, and be sure  
You'll wake forthwith!' "

—Only how could he in his sleep?

As he says this with a light complacent laugh,  
suddenly he finds

"The midnight round

One fire."

Across the sky

"Sudden there went,  
Like horror and astonishment,  
A fierce vindictive scribble of red  
Quick flame across,"

as if the angry scribe of Judgment said—

" 'There—

Burn it!' . . .

I felt begin

The Judgment-Day: to retrocede  
Was too late now.—'In very deed,'  
(I uttered to myself) 'that Day!'  
The intuition burned away  
All darkness from my spirit too:—  
There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew,  
*Choosing the world.* . . .

. . . Agony

Gave boldness: since my life had end

And my choice with it—best defend,  
 Applaud both! I resolved to say,  
 'So was I framed by Thee, such way  
 I put to use Thy senses here!  
 It was so beautiful, so near,  
 Thy world,—what could I do but choose  
 My part there? . . .

. . . I could put the cup  
 Undrained of half its fulness, by;  
 But, to renounce it utterly,  
 —That was too hard! . . .

. . . Is it for this mood,  
 That Thou, whose earth delights so well,  
 Hast made its complement a hell?'

A final belch of fire like blood,  
 Overbroke all heaven in one flood  
 Of doom. Then fire was sky, and sky  
 Fire, and both, one ecstasy,  
 Then ashes. But I heard no noise  
 (Whatever was) because a Voice  
 Beside me spoke thus, 'All is done,  
 Time ends, Eternity's begun,  
 And thou art judged for evermore.'

I looked up—all seemed as before;"

the last watch of night over the common; no trace of  
 the cloud-Tophet overhead.

" 'A dream—a waking dream at most !'  
 (I spoke out quick, that I might shake  
 The horrid nightmare off, and wake.)  
 'The world gone, yet the world is here ?  
 Are not all things as they appear ?  
 Is Judgment past for me alone ?  
 —And where had place the great White Throne ?'  
 . . . . .  
 When, lo, again, the Voice by me ! "

"I saw," as if some Arab, staggering blindly over  
 what was yesterday "a palm-tree-cinctured city," now

"Calcined  
 To ashes, silence, nothingness,—  
 . . . should surprise  
 The imaged Vapour, head to foot,  
 Surveying, motionless and mute,  
 Its work, ere, in a whirlwind rapt,  
 It vanish up again.—So hapt  
 My chance. He stood there. Like the smoke  
 Pillared o'er Sodom, when day broke,—  
 I saw Him. One magnific pall  
 Mantled in massive fold and fall,  
 His Dread, and coiled in snaky swathes  
 About His feet : night's black, that bathes  
 All else, broke, grizzled with despair,  
 Against the soul of blackness there.  
 A gesture told the mood within—

. . . pity mixed  
 With the fulfilment of decree.  
 Motionless, thus, He spoke to me,  
 Who fell before His feet, a mass,  
 No man now.

' All is come to pass.  
 God is, thou art,—the rest is hurled  
 To nothingness for thee. This world,  
 This finite life, thou hast preferred,  
 In disbelief of God's own word,  
 To Heaven and to Infinity.' "

*Take* your choice then :—

" ' Thou art shut  
 Out of the Heaven of Spirit ; glut  
 Thy sense upon the world : 'tis thine  
 For ever—take it !'  
 ' How ? Is mine,  
 The world ?' "

he exclaims with transport—

" ' Hast Thou spoke  
 Plainly in that ? Earth's exquisite  
 Treasures of wonder and delight,  
 For me ?'

The austere Voice returned,—  
 ' So soon made happy ? Hadst thou learned  
 What God accounteth happiness,

Thou wouldst not find it hard to guess  
What Hell may be His punishment  
For those who doubt if God invent  
Better than they. Let such men rest  
Content with what they judged the best.  
    . . . Take all the ancient show !

    . . . . .  
I leave thee with the old amount  
Of faculties, nor less nor more,  
Unvisited, as heretofore,  
By God's free Spirit, that makes an end.  
So, once more, take thy world ! Expend  
Eternity upon its shows,—  
Flung thee as freely as one rose  
Out of a summer's opulence,  
Over the Eden-barrier whence  
Thou art excluded. Knock in vain ! ”

Then the poet breathes free again, the warmth returns to his heart, and he begins to console himself with the endless beauty of the world which is to be his portion. But the Voice comes again :—

    “ ‘ Welcome so to rate  
The arras-folds that variegate  
The earth, God's antechamber ; well !  
The wise who waited there, could tell  
By these, what royalties in store

Lay one step past the entrance-door.

. . . . .  
All partial beauty was a pledge  
Of beauty in its plenitude :  
But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,  
Retain it ! plenitude be theirs  
Who looked above ! ”

Then sharp despairs begin to shoot through him.  
“Though my trust be gone from Nature, give me Art,”  
he cries.

“Obtain it,” said the Voice ; “but have not sculptors,  
painters, always felt a perfection in their souls which  
their Art here only hinted at ? Were not their best  
performances

“Poor tentatives they shrank,  
Smitten at heart from,”

crying—

“‘Shall I be judged by only these ?’

. . . Think, *now*

What pomp in Buonarroti’s brow,  
With its new palace-brain where dwells  
Superb the soul, unvexed by cells  
That crumbled with the transient clay !

. . . How will he quench his thirst,  
Titanically infantine,  
Laid at the breast of the Divine ?  
Does it confound thee,—this first page



Emblazoning man's heritage?—  
 Can this alone absorb thy sight,  
 As if they" (the pages emblazoning man's her-  
     itage) "were not infinite,—  
 Like the omnipotence which tasks  
 Itself, to furnish all that asks  
 The soul it means to satiate?  
 What was the world . . .  
 What else than needful furniture  
 For life's first stage? . . . Pass  
 Life's line,—and what has earth to do,  
 Its utmost beauty's appanage,  
 With the requirements of next stage?  
 . . . . .  
 See the enwrapping rocky niche,  
 Sufficient for the sleep, in which  
 The lizard breathes for ages safe:  
 Split the mould,'—

and as the niche that sufficed before, now

    " 'Would chafe  
     The creature's new world-widened sense,' "  
 the minute after earth's thousand sights and sounds

    " 'Broke  
 In, on him, at the chisel's stroke;  
     . . . So  
 Has God abolished at a blow

This world wherein His saints were pent,—  
 Who, though found grateful and content,  
 With the provision there, as thou,  
 Yet knew He would not disallow  
 Their spirit's hunger, felt as well,—  
 Unsated,—not unsatable,  
 As Paradise gives proof. Deride  
 Their choice now, thou who sit'st outside!"

Then "Mind, give me Mind!" he cries in anguish.

" 'Oh, let me strive to make the most  
 Of the poor stinted soul, I nipped  
 Of budding wings!'"

And though she needs must be content with the  
 ground—

" 'Still, I can profit by late found  
 But precious knowledge, . . .  
 And try how far my tethered strength  
 May crawl in this poor breadth and length.

. . . . .  
 Not joyless, though more favoured feet  
 Stand calm, where I want wings to beat  
 The floor. At least earth's bond is broke!'

Then, (sickening even while I spoke,)  
 'Let me alone! . . .  
 . . . I know what Thou wilt say!  
 All still is earth's. . . .

. . . I have reached the goal—  
 "Whereto does Knowledge serve!" will burn  
 My eyes, too sure, at every turn!  
 . . . . .  
 The goal's a ruin like the rest!"

"Even worse than the others this thy latter quest,"  
 added the Voice, for

" ' Even on earth  
 Whenever, in man's soul had birth  
 Those intuitions, grasps of guess,  
 That pull the more into the less,  
 Making the finite comprehend  
 Infinity,' "—

the bard well knew all *his* task was but to arrange  
 the strings,—

" ' Knowing it was the South that harped.  
 . . . . .  
 Distinguished his and God's part: whence  
 A world of spirit as of sense  
 Was plain to him, . . .  
 Which he could traverse, not remain  
 A guest in :—else were permanent  
 Heaven on earth, which its gleams were meant  
 To sting with hunger for full light.' "

All he could attain to here was

" ' Truth by means  
 Of fable, showing while it screens,—  
 Since highest truth, man e'er supplied,  
 Was ever fable on outside.  
 Such gleams made bright the earth an age ;  
*Now*, the whole sun's his heritage !  
 —Take up thy world, it is allowed,  
 Thou who hast entered in the cloud ! '

Then I—' Behold my spirit bleeds,  
 Catches no more at broken reeds,—  
 But lilies flower those reeds above :  
 I let the world go, and take Love ! '

. . . . .  
 At the word,  
 The Form, I looked to have been stirred  
 With pity and approval, rose  
 O'er me, as when the headsman throws  
 Axe over shoulder to make end—  
 I fell prone, letting Him expend  
 His wrath, while thus, the inflicting Voice  
 Smote me.—' Is *this* thy final choice ?  
 Love is the best ? 'Tis somewhat late !  
 And all thou dost enumerate  
 Of power and beauty in the world  
 The mightiness of love was curled  
 Inextricably round about.  
 Love lay within it and without,

To clasp thee,—but in vain ! Thy soul  
Still shrunk from Him who made the whole,  
Still set deliberate aside  
His Love !—Now take Love ! . . .

. . . Haste to take

The show of Love for the name's sake,  
Remembering every moment Who

. . . was said

To undergo death in thy stead  
In flesh like thine : so ran the tale.' ”

Why did you doubt it?—

“ ‘ Upon the ground

That in the story had been found

*Too much love! How could God love so?'"*

Yet you could believe that man

“ ‘Both *could* and *did* invent that scheme  
Of perfect Love—’twould well beseem  
Cain’s nature thou wast wont to praise,  
Not tally with God’s usual ways!’

And I cowered deprecatingly—  
 'Thou Love of God ! Or let me die,  
 Or grant what shall seem Heaven almost !  
 Let me not know that all is lost,  
 Though lost it be. . . .  
 Let the old life seem mine—no more—

With limitation as before,  
 With darkness, hunger, toil, distress :  
 Be all the earth a wilderness !  
 Only let me go on, go on,  
 Still hoping ever and anon  
 To reach one eve the Better Land !'

Then did the Form expand, expand—  
 I knew Him through the dread disguise,  
 As the whole God within His eyes  
 Embraced me.

When I lived again,  
 The day was breaking,—the grey plain  
 I rose from, silvered thick with dew.  
 Was this a vision ? False or true ?"

Commonly, through the three varied years since that  
 night, his mind is bent to think it was a dream, but  
 a dream that colours his whole after-life as he goes  
 through the world—

"Still struggling to effect  
 My warfare ; happy that I can  
 Be crossed and thwarted as a man,  
 Not left in God's contempt apart,  
 With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart,  
 Tame in earth's paddock as her prize.  
 . . . . .  
 Thank God, no paradise stands barred

To entry, and I find it hard  
To be a Christian, as I said !”

Yet every now and then, when things seem to go too  
well with him, the old terror comes, and

“ All grows drear  
Spite of the sunshine, while I fear  
And think, ‘ How dreadful to be grudged  
No ease henceforth, as one that’s judged,  
Condemned to earth for ever, shut  
From Heaven.’

But Easter-Day breaks ! But  
Christ rises !”

We have not then renounced

“ Life for the sake  
Of death, and nothing else.”


There is a resurrection as well as a burial. “ If we  
be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him.”  
“ Buried with Him,” we are “ also risen with Him ;”  
and “ If we be risen with Christ,” and “ seek those  
things which are above,” even here and now, “ He  
who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up  
for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give  
us all things ?”

“ Mercy every way  
Is infinite,—and who can say ?”

## OF THE EPILOGUE TO "DRAMATIS PERSONÆ."

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LIKE "Fifine at the Fair," many of Mr Browning's books begin and end with a Prologue and an Epilogue ; and when it is so, these poems, though often very unlike in style to the rest of the contents, may generally be taken as the key-note and enharmonic chord, as it were, of the book, summing up in themselves much of the essence and teaching of the whole. They have, therefore, a special importance in virtue of their position, apart from their individual value as poems, and it is necessary to read at once the poems they enclose as explained by them, and them as explained by the poems they enclose. I propose to conclude by taking up two of these Epilogues, because, like "Fifine at the Fair," more even than is the common fate of Mr Browning's deeper poems, they seem to me,





short and uninvolved as they are, to have been misconceived and misrepresented.

The first of these is the beautiful poem which appears as the Epilogue at once of "Dramatis Personæ" and of the whole contents of the six-volume edition of Mr Browning's poems. This Epilogue is paired with no Prologue, and in virtue of the position the poet has chosen for it, as the last word of his then published poems, we naturally look for in it something like a summing up, so far, of his own idea of his life's work ; nor, I think, do we look in vain.

The poem divides itself into three parts, and is put into the mouths of three different speakers,—David, Renan, and an unnamed third, who clearly represents the poet himself as giving his own answer to the question and lament of the second speaker.

This question is, Where is *now* God's visible Presence in the world? David believed he had it long ago, when

"The Temple filled with a cloud,  
Even the House of the Lord,  
Porch bent and pillar bowed :  
For the Presence of the Lord,  
In the glory of His cloud,  
Had filled the House of the Lord."

Ah, yes ! but "gone now," says Renan, Temple and Cloud alike. Gone, too, that nearer, dearer Presence, when

"We gazed our fill  
With upturned faces on as real a Face

That, stooping from grave music and mild fire,  
Took in our homage, made a visible place

Through many a depth of glory, gyre on gyre,—  
For the dim human tribute. Was this true?

Why did it end?"

Whose fault was it?—

"Who failed to beat the breast"

when first

"This Star addressed  
Itself to motion,"

now

"Lost in the night at last"?

Why now are we

"Lone and left  
Silent through centuries,"

in which

"We shall not look up, know ourselves are seen,  
Speak, and be sure that we again are heard"—

"Where" now

"May hide what came and loved our clay"?

So Renan questions and laments—

"Witless alike of will and way divine,"  
answers the poet. *Is* God's visible Presence with-

drawn from our earth, though the Cloud fills the Temple no longer, and the Star that "chose to stoop and stay for us" has gone back where it was before? Where was it before, where is it now? Where, but on the Throne of the Universe?

Take each man's life, and see in the dance of circumstances around it, differentiating each from each and from all other, shaping each to its end as if there were no other life in the universe to be cared for but it,—and say is God's visible presence not about us in the world still?—rather is not the whole universe instinct with it?

It is not without a meaning that this poem was chosen by Mr Browning as the Epilogue of his then collected poems. By far the greater part of these poems occupy themselves with our human life,—“Men and Women” might almost be the collective name of them all. In putting this poem as his last word, it is as if he said, “Here in the Providences that mould these human lives of ours, which I have been trying to give glimpses of, it is that we are to look now for the manifestation of that Face that “came and loved our clay.”

“Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls  
O' the world are that? . . .  
That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Become my universe that feels and knows!”

OF THE EPILOGUE  
TO "FERISHTAH'S FANCIES."

---

THE other of these, as I think, commonly much misunderstood Epilogues is the beautiful lyric which concludes "Ferishtah's Fancies." Here we have an Epilogue paired with a somewhat fantastic Prologue giving the key-note to what we are to expect in the book;—a book in which "sense, sight, and song" is each to play its part,—a book of parables.

"Be it the symbol, not the symbolised," he says,  
"I and thou safelier take upon our lips."

The whole book is as if the poet said, "Let me take the commonest earthly illustration I can find, if by so doing I can the more clearly make to be understood the lessons I have to teach." So Cherries, Camels on a journey, The punishment of an unruly camel, Fire in flint, &c., all play their part in this

book of object-lessons in the divine mysteries. In keeping therefore with the whole tenor of the book, its Epilogue is to some extent also parabolic,—though in it the shadow almost melts into the Substance, and while the manner and metre are those of an earthly love-song, the sense is only applicable to a Love which is Divine. It is, in fact, a summing up of Mr Browning's philosophy of life in the form of an address to the Infinite Love.

The poem begins with a sort of apology, as it were, from the poet, that the universal "moanings and groanings" in the world around, which almost seem a treason to the Love that made and governs it, should be heeded by him at all. Yet when appealed to by human suffering, what can he do but listen?—

"Yet even when I do hear," he says, "sudden circle  
round me,  
Much as when the moon's might frees a space from  
cloud,  
Iridescent splendours — glooms would else confound  
me  
Barriered back and banished far—bright-edged the  
blackest shroud."

However dark the distance may seem, round himself at least there is a space of light and brightness Love-created, and "thronging through the cloud-rift" come the faces of the Great and the Good of all ages,

98 OF THE EPILOGUE TO "FERISHTAH'S FANCIES."

smiling the question, "Are the lessons of our lives,  
then, so soon forgotten?"—

"Was it for mere fool's play, make-belief, and mum-  
ming  
So we battled it like men, not boy-like sulked and  
whined?  
Each of us heard clang God's 'Come,' and each was  
coming,  
Soldiers all to forward-face, not sneaks to lag behind."

But what of the battle all around? what of the  
world's fate? "That concerned our Leader," they  
answer,—each of us had his own stroke to care for,—  
that was his concern. "The field's fortune" was our  
Leader's care.

"Then the cloud-rift broadens, spanning earth that's  
under,"—

including all in its embrace of light;—

"Wide our world displays her worth,—man's strife  
and strife's success,  
All the good and beauty, wonder crowning wonder,  
Till my heart and soul applaud, perfection,—nothing  
less."

But a sudden doubt seizes him in the midst of the  
triumph. "What if, after all, my solution of the

mystery of the world should turn out to be all a mistake?"

"A chill wind disencharms all the late enchantment;"—

till he remembers Whose Hand is on the helm of the universe, and turns back from the sudden terror to the comfort of those circling Arms that he knows to be about his own head, and believes to be about each and all of us, with the happy question—"They there, what would it matter if my philosophy of life *were* all a delusion?"—

"What *if* all be error,

If the halo irised round my head were, Love, thine arms?"



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